

VARIETIES OF ALTERITY: ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS IN THE UK, ITALY AND CHINA

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Introduction

The orthodox approach to meeting the challenges of the food system in the 21st century has been labelled “sustainable intensification” (see Marsden and Morley, 2014). This yield-driven approach has been critiqued for reflecting «a largely incremental, technology-driven and adaptive strand of the prevailing paradigm rather than offering a means of systematic restructuring» (Sage, 2012: 204). By framing the food system as an isolated issue of production, agriculture becomes disconnected from the rest of the food system, future consumption patterns are falsely assumed to be fixed, and the potential of small scale “organic” farms is obscured (Niles, 2009). In response to this orthodoxy, a substantial number of initiatives centred on experimenting with different models of food provisioning have sprawled throughout the world, the common nature of which is referred to with the umbrella term “Alternative Food Networks” (AFNs). At their core, AFNs are networks where consumers directly purchase produce from producers through different forms of direct exchange. The term AFN has been applied to a wide variety of rapidly diffusing initiatives and schemes of food provisioning that express a sense of differentiation from, and to some extent counteraction to, the orthodox modes of provisioning (i.e. supermarkets and long food chains) which dominate the conventional food system. In this paper we explore how AFNs, in different ways that are

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context dependent, provide a variety of alternatives to the mainstream approach.

1. Characteristics of Alternative Food Networks

Principally separating AFNs from the vicissitudes of “conventional” agriculture is the concept of “embeddedness”, that become inevitably involved with direct producer-consumer market exchange (Murdoch, Marsden and Banks, 2000). AFNs are thus typically framed as being local sites (due to the close proximity required for direct exchange) of emancipation from the demands made by global neoliberal forces that serve to undermine food quality, health, the local/rural economy, community, trust and the environment (Murdoch, Marsden and Banks, 2000; Jarosz, 2000; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Whatmore, Stassart and Renting, 2003; Pretty *et al.*, 2005). Hence AFNs are generally organized around attempts to “re-socialise” (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2008; Sage, 2011; Goodman, Dupuis and Goodman, 2012) and “re-localise” (Hinrichs, 2003; Mount, 2012) food. Re-socialisation rests upon bringing food out of the highly individualized fashion in which consumers make personal choices within the wide range offered by supermarkets and other corporate retailers, and more fully into the civic arena where public issues are given weight and consideration (Sage, 2011). It operates by building relations and promoting stronger connections among a whole set of food-related actors, not limited to producers and consumers but also comprising restaurateurs, food writers, grassroots food movements, civil society organizations, consumer co-ops and social entrepreneurs, which are all to some degree engaged in finding an alternative to the more standardised patterns of conventional food supply.

Food re-localisation is practiced by the production, processing, retailing and consumption all taking place within a prescribed area – as in the case of short chains (farm shops), farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture¹, box schemes, solidarity-based purchasing groups², food hubs³,

¹ Community supported agriculture exists when a community of individuals pledge support to a farm operation, so that growers and consumers provide mutual support and share the risks and benefits of the growing activity. Commonly, the members of the community cover in advance the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer’s salary. In return, they receive shares of the farm production regularly throughout the growing season, usually through a periodic fresh food box scheme. In addition to the risk reduction, thanks to such initiatives growers receive better prices for their crops, gain some financial security, and are relieved of much of the burden of marketing.

urban agriculture, community gardens – and/or through the exchange of products which embody the natural and/or cultural characteristics of a particular area, even if retailed or consumed far outside the production area – for example, organic agriculture, *terroir* and speciality products, craft products, and products with protected denomination of origin (see Tregear, 2011). In these cases, these embedded traits of food products from within specified places and ecologies act to contrast the perceived rootless (or despatialised) nature characterising the conventional system and its outputs. In other words, by being local, AFNs are argued to be bringing «positive value to local economic and social connectivity, environmental conservation, and known provenance and quality – in other words authenticity – (...) [in response to] the negative costs of global food transportation, pesticide use and industrial agriculture» (Seyfang, 2004: 300).

Yet the values that AFNs may propagate are dependent on the geographical context from which they emerge. In this paper, we tentatively map out how AFNs, across different contexts, can express different varieties of alterity. The intent here is to, in the vein of other research, subvert the dualisms of local/global, ethical/corporate, traditional/rational which have tended to haunt AFN discussion (Holloway *et al.*, 2007; Levkoe, 2011; McClintock, 2014; Turner and Hope, 2014) and revisit the traditional portrayal of AFNs which «tend[s] to assume not only that organic food networks try to uphold certain right principles and ensure certain good outcomes, but also that these networks should try to uphold certain right principles and ensure certain good outcomes» (Clarke *et al.*, 2008: 228).

Thus, this paper goes beyond Watts, Ilbery and Maye (2005) claim that suggests AFNs can be considered as “stronger” when they emphasise the embedded qualities of direct exchange and alternative market ideologies, i.e. “*alternative* food networks” – often associated with North American examples of AFNs. AFNs associated with European examples conversely tend to emphasise the unconventional (i.e. local) production methods hence

² Solidarity-based purchasing groups are defined as those non-profit associations set up to carry out collective purchase of foods and distribution thereof, without application of any charge to members, with ethical purposes of social solidarity, environmental sustainability and food quality (adapted from the 2007 Finance Act of the Italian Government).

³ A food hub is a business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers in order to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand (National Food Hub Collaboration website, visited October 2015).

the descriptor “alternative *food* networks” and their connotation as “weaker” for having a less “transformative” potential. Positing AFNs as “weaker” or “stronger”, we argue, obscures how “alternatives” have both emerged and been constructed through a variety of socialised responses which are dependent on the local conditions AFNs are derived from: the question of what AFNs are being alternative to is intimately linked to the particularities of the local conventional food system.

In following, we take examples of AFNs from three distinct areas, the UK, Italy and China, to explore how the “alterity” of AFNs are dependent on (1) particular social (and spatial) contexts, which in turn shapes their relation to (2) locality, (3) scale and (4) food materialities.

2. Methodological Note

Over 2016, approximately 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted – alongside a mix of participant observation and analysis of the website and social media presence of AFNs – in each of the UK, Italy and China field-sites. Interviews were conducted with producers, consumers, scheme organizers, and local agri-food economy experts at each location. These methods were chosen for their ability to capture the diversity of ways both consumers, and producers, experience AFNs. The field journal entries, interview transcripts and social media transcripts were transcribed and coded using an emergent, grounded theory approach (see Glaser, 1992). This fieldwork was part of three wider and distinct PhD projects. The UK segment was based in Lancashire, in the North West of England, the Italian segment in the Milan area (Lombardy region), and the Chinese fieldwork was done in and around Guangzhou, China’s third largest city in the province of Guangdong. The study encompasses various types of AFNs, reflecting the diffusion of the distinct forms of such organizations within the three field-sites.⁴

3. Context

⁴ For example, purchasing groups are very common in Italy, whereas this is not the case for the UK and China. Conversely, throughout all Italy there are only two Csa farms, being instead this type of scheme quite spread in the other two countries.

In the UK we identify that alterity is predominantly centred on providing a clear difference to the intensely conventionalised food chain. In other words, UK consumers are not engaging in AFNs for the want of quality or organic food – which they can buy at supermarkets, albeit in industrially produced form – but to take part in direct exchange, usually at a local level. Often AFNs here are associated with community development projects that focus on inclusivity and widening socioeconomic access to healthy food. In Italy, direct exchange revolves more around the producer providing the consumer with a “culinary adventure”, the option of purchasing something that cannot be found at a supermarket. This adventure often entails a secondary function of sustaining the establishment of a fairer set of commercial relations between consumers and producers and supporting local farmers and their traditional production practices – hence the stronger link between AFNs and rural development initiatives in Italy. China, while also being highly product orientated, has to equally emphasise the process of direct exchange to give their product any sort of legitimacy. Unlike in Western countries where «in opinion polling, consumers consistently and overwhelmingly indicate a willingness to grant trust to farmers as a generic group, and exceptional levels of trust to small and/or local farmers» (Mount, 2012: 114), in China scepticism comes first. This scepticism has arisen from the propensity China’s food system has towards the large-scale production and circulation of hazardous foods (Wang *et al.*, 2015; Scott *et al.*, 2014) and China’s stark urban-rural divide (Lai, 2014). Fig. 1 sets up a framework that explains how the context, and the key variables therein, shape the emergence of AFNs.

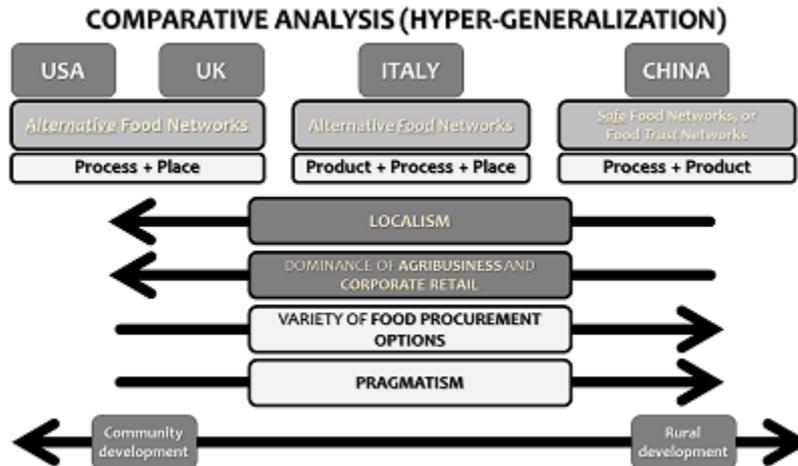


Fig. 1 - Varieties of Alterity in AFNs across the USA, UK, Italy and China
 Source: own elaboration

In this figure, we use Watts (2005) typology of “*alternative food networks*” and “*alternative food networks*” to highlight the subtle change in emphasis between the alternative processes associated with AFN (focusing on direct exchange) and the alternative product (a variety of “value added” processes) between the UK and Italy. AFNs in China conversely, are all about the network aspect as they are foremost attempts to developing new trust-based relationships – different to those engendered by the conventional chain – between producers and consumers.

Although one can easily conceive of an AFN with UK-type characteristics existing in China and vice-versa, and that some AFN-types (e.g. CSAs, buying clubs, food assemblies) lend themselves to emphasise certain characteristics (e.g. process, place, product) nevertheless, this typology highlights the broad trends of the differing varieties of alterity in relation to their spatial context. Whilst a generalisation, this figure also offers a useful lens to understand alterity and emphasises that ‘alternativeness’ does not represent a fixed category in food systems. Indeed, AFNs are dependent on the construction of place (Harris, 2010) and should be characterised relationally to the context in which they emerge. That AFNs are centred on forms of direct exchange, and thus social proximity, entails that their alterity is intimately tied to notions of the local.

4. Locality

In the UK, the commitment to “the local” by AFNs is reflected by a commitment to ensuring shorter – if not more transparent – commodity chains despite the business pressures these chains often entail. Tellingly, the question of where the boundaries of “the local” lay regularly recurred with the participants, often with no clear answer. As one participant at a CSA scheme suggested, «frequently I’ve come across people who say they buy locally from [a large supermarket chain] and that starts a whole conversation around “well, what does that mean?”». Indeed, many cases from the UK context show how producers considered “the local” to be important, and something to value, whilst at the same time recognising that it could be conceptualised in different ways. The “local” as being intrinsically “good” often came up against questions of scale, and how far producers might want their produce to travel. Thus “locality” is not often taken as a self-evident frame of reference and is instead always being defined and re-defined (Carolan, 2016).

This emphasis on locality differs in an Italian context, as AFNs have emerged less to confront the dynamics of the globalised conventional system and more as response to increasing market demand for fresh and tasty food. Thus, Italian AFNs are firstly a reflection of the emerging market for quality food, and secondly, as said, a means to build and sustain a fairer economic exchange between consumers and producers: an objective that is pursued by rationally implementing a series of processes primarily on the local scale, even though, in some cases, longer-haul (direct and fair) relations with producers are not unimaginable. This is exemplified by the fact that many Milan AFNs do not renounce setting up a direct channel to purchase peculiar place-specific food items, even if they do come from distant geographies⁵, while they apply the “as local as possible” criterion for every other product which is available in the region, thus reflecting an emphasis on practicality as opposed to a more utopian-driven strategy. Localism here is not a driving principle but nevertheless becomes intimately associated with AFNs as an obvious by-product of “quality” produce, and the realisation of a direct, more socially just, exchange. This subtle difference between the UK and Italy lies partly in the level of dominance of the conventional agri-business food system – that is

⁵ Most common examples are buffalo mozzarella, which is produced (almost) only in some parts of central and southern Italy, and oranges, which grow only in the south of the country.

progressively distorting (if not disrupting) the producer-consumer relationship – which is occurring relatively less in Italy (and furthermore in China) in comparison to the UK. Thus, whereas in the UK alterity becomes distinct through local framings, in Italy, due to the existence of other food procurement opportunities outside the supermarket (other than AFNs, small independent shops, street or indoor markets, and other food outlets are still much more common) the pressure on AFNs to emphasise their alterity as locality is less onerous. Additionally, the urban and rural are more clearly interlinked, with many Italians still maintaining a connection with the farming countryside for sourcing some of their food – especially with staple ingredients⁶. In Italy, there is less pressure for AFNs to emphasise locality for the processes of direct exchange to work effectively – alterity is more likely to be emphasised in other avenues.

Chinese AFNs present an extreme example of this point concerning alterity and locality. In China, the notion of locality is almost completely absent in their AFN discourse. However, this has not negated the potential for AFNs here to become transformative in relationships to food. Arguably, it is this absence of locality that emphasizes direct exchange and producer-consumer reconnection more so, in China AFNs cannot rely on locality to foster consumer goodwill (Martindale, forthcoming). An item of organic produce which is dirty and bug bitten is far less likely to be forgiven by the Chinese AFN member, whereas in the UK or Italy this form of produce may be seen as a clear sign of organic authenticity (Eden, Bear and Walker, 2008). To compensate, Chinese AFNs focus more on the processes of direct exchange to ensure that they create active expressions of trust (Martindale, forthcoming). This difference lies partly with the Chinese cultural context, in which the concept of “ethical consumerism” and notions of supporting local farmers are largely absent (Scott *et al.*, 2014). In practice, there is often a large disconnect in the values between the members and the AFNs themselves (Si, Schumilas and Scott, 2014). For consumers in China, AFNs are seen – initially anyway – simply as a source for procuring safe and quality food, far removed from the priorities that we can identify in Italy and the UK contexts.

5. Scale

⁶ A common example is olive oil: many families would still know where to buy a good oil directly from the producer.

The question of how to scale-up these localised organisations whilst maintaining the necessary element of direct exchange – required to reconnect producers and consumers – underpins much of AFN literature (Mount, 2012). In other words, how do you scale-up an organisation that depends on local proximity and interaction? This paradox lies at the heart of AFNs, and scholars have recognised how alternatives can “lose” their sense of difference and in doing so become “conventionalised” (Berlan and Dolan, 2014). In the terms of scaling-up (i.e. increasing member reach) there is more fluidity if notions of localism are less rigid. Different emphasises of alterity also shape how AFNs relate to senses of scale. For example, large purchasing group schemes in Italy⁷ that have grown to a size that extends beyond their “local” area has enabled them to overcome certain logistical barriers and develop their own economies of scale. Thus, these purchasing groups are able to purchase directly from more distant producers, even without losing that distinctive collaborative, mutually supportive, and direct relationship. Here scaling-up is not an economic imperative, but comes from a sense of expanding possibilities and including a wider ranges of distinctive products. When confronted with the possibility of being critiqued for losing the positive effects of local anchorage, an organizer of one of these purchasing groups reported: «we manage a direct chain, not a km⁰⁸ one. Our dimension allows us to buy a whole container of fresh veg from a producer in Apulia⁹ every week, and pay him a price he would never get in his local market».

In the UK scaling-up is generally fraught with more tension, due to the stronger association locality has with alterity in a context more thoroughly dominated by agri-business and “supermarketisation”. One UK participant for example, in favour of a larger-scale AFN, articulated that he would: «hate for the local food movement to lose sight of the global connection. The fact is that we have such a connected system that it’s just so complicated, like where do you [focus]». This view, which indicates a struggle between notions of locality and scaling-up, perhaps haunts UK AFNs more so than AFNs in China or Italy. There is a tendency in the UK

⁷ The most relevant AFN schemes in Italy are the Gas groups (Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale, or solidarity-based purchasing group), which in the last twenty years have sprawled throughout the country and have become a significant presence in many Italian locales. In the province of Milan, for example, there are more than 175 Gas, especially concentrated in the city’s most populated areas, but also present in the smaller centres of the hinterland (See Borrelli *et al.*, 2017).

⁸ The Italian expression for “minimization of food miles”.

⁹ Approximately a thousand miles away from Milan.

to deploy the local as a frame through which to question global tendencies around food production, distribution and consumption, which is at the same time assuming the local is something to be protected or cherished in light of the sequestering tendencies of modernity (Winter, 2003).

In China, AFNs are explicitly championed by their proprietors as expressions of modernity, and AFN managers are first and foremost pioneering and tech-savvy entrepreneurs (Zuo, 2014; Yu, 2015). China's rural urban divide has meant that food producers have to avoid an association with the peasant figure, which in contemporary china are seen to be "backward", "uncultured" and thus untrustworthy (Lai, 2014). Thus, issues regarding scaling in China are not hampered by ideals of localism which potentially negates aspects of modernity, but rather by issues of trust, and the logistics involved to develop a strong member base so that the AFN can become a viable enterprise. AFNs in China are still nascent and consumer awareness of these "alternatives" are lacking¹⁰. In fact, participants claim that 90% of larger AFNs projects fail in China, or are forced to rely on other enterprises to survive due to the level of initial investment they require (which is often spent "cleaning" polluted land and recruiting members). That approaches to scale differ across contexts, significantly effects the nature of alterity in AFNs.

Whilst locality and scale is central to understanding how AFNs are alternative, the visceral and tactile qualities of the food itself is also critical in shaping the nature of alterity in these networks (Carolan, 2016). In this next section, we discuss the materialities of food across these three sites.

6. Food Materialities

Food materialities explore the ways in which acts of production, consumption and ingestion are assembled, disassembled and reassembled within the networks of relations in which they are embedded (Abbots and Lavis, 2013). In other words, each act of production and consumption both generates and ruptures networks of social relations. Thus AFNs, which are often centred around disrupting norms by reconnecting producers and consumers via the tactile qualities of food, are well placed to explore how diverse materialities, agencies and socialities are made manifest through the everyday processes that surround food. Based on the data from these case

¹⁰ AFNs in China are a relatively new phenomenon, Little Donkey Farm is widely regarded as the first CSA farm in China which opened in 2008.

studies, we suggest that food materialities, the tactile and visceral qualities of food, can be understood in multiple ways. In particular, we highlight how these tactile and visceral qualities engender a reconnection to the active processes of food production, a connection which often disrupts the materialities associated with conventional food networks.

Across the UK, Italy and China, food materialities are utilised in different ways depending on the alterity that each context needs to emphasise to promote its type of direct exchange. A CSA farm located on a university campus in the UK for example had aims to incorporate regular cookery lessons in nearby facilities using the produce they had grown on site. These activities, which emphasise the visceral qualities of food, offer practical means for consumers to reconnect with food. As one of the managers at this scheme suggested, questions around food production can only be raised through «that connection with food [being] rekindled». Intriguingly, this sense of connection is both sensory and ecological («you've got to be able to walk around and see it growing») as well as temporal (the need to «cut out the un-seasonality that goes on»). For this participant, this emphasis on creating new food materialities opened up questions that the conventional food system would tend to hide behind the “veil” of commodity fetishism, namely the food processing chain (Hudson and Hudson, 2003).

In Italy, food materialities are based around the importance of food as a crucial cultural object. This is still apparent today despite the on-going processes of conventionalization of agriculture and supermaketisation, a point which holds for China too. The strength of this cultural role played by food is linked to the strong connection between family life and everyday practices (Scarpellini, 2012). Indeed, food in Italy is experienced as a trait of material culture, which is manifested by the diffuse culinary varieties across regions. Shared food habits and traditions deliver an immediate sense of belonging and contribute to the construction of individual as well collective identities (Balma-Tivola, 2010), thus they are more effectively safeguarded from the disconnecting effects of capitalist commodification. With less need to restore a tactile link with food, the materialities of food created by Italian AFNs tend to be utilised to deliver rural development advantages. Indeed, AFNs through which “quality” products are marketed provide an opportunity for revenue diversification in rural areas and help ensure fairer wages for producers of food (Renting, Marsden and Banks, 2003). This is a contrast to the UK examples that tend to be associated more with community and urban projects focused on increasing consumer awareness to food.

Food materialities in Chinese AFN context revolve around creating bonds of trust of which food plays a central role in facilitating. In China, forming strong bonds of trust is necessary for direct exchange to occur due to the high levels of mistrust in a food landscape plagued by food safety fears (Wang *et al.*, 2015). The focus on freshness and taste have become front and central to how Chinese AFNs attempt to disrupt conventional food materialities. However, these food qualities also create a precarious position to uphold if consumers are used to perfect looking food. Celebrating and validating these visceral and tactile qualities is the key role of the social media staff on CSA farms in China due to the assumed cynicism on behalf of the consumer.

Member: Today's bananas are hard. And there are some black spots on them. They don't seem well.

Staff: Well, you can taste a little bit. If the bananas were still raw, I will cancel them and check the bananas tomorrow.

Member: Usually the black spot means the bananas are ripe.

Staff: I know, but they are still hard and raw.

Member: These green bananas are a little harder than those yellow one.

Staff: They are very different. And there are many black spots on the bottom too.

Staff: I checked the bananas in the warehouse. They are all fine. You can taste a little bit. If the bananas were still raw, I will cancel them for you.

Member: I will try again tomorrow. Maybe the bananas were picked when they were still raw.»

Staff: Sure. We will deliver every Thursday. The strawberries we have this year are a bit sour, does your kid like it? Has he tried it yet?

Member: Yes. As long as it has no pesticides.

(Two extracts from a CSA farm's social media transcript, 2016).

In these examples, social media is crucial to help mediate the unknown visceral and tactile qualities of food, regarding taste and appearance, which may put off member. The instant immediacy of social media acts as a necessary medium to ensure trust is maintained – or the member may become dissatisfied and cancel the subscription. In fact, due to the way in which the food materialities are utilised to promote trust in Chinese AFNs, there is an argument to be made that a more accurate descriptor of these AFNs might be *Safe* Food Networks, or Food *Trust* Networks.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have suggested that alterity cannot be conceived as being weaker or stronger but emerging in a variety of ways depending on differing but subtle emphasis regarding locality, scale and food materialities, all of which impact the process of direct exchange upon which AFNs depend. This paper has highlighted how emphasising locality – in the sense of local producers – could be the central tenant of alterity in some contexts whereas in another, locality is more important in regard to the place of origin for the produce. AFNs will juggle the emphasis in order to maximise the returns from direct exchange.

Scale also significantly shapes the nature of alterity in AFNs. In the UK (and the US) where leftist movements tend to be proud of, and are somewhat ranked by, their radical and non-conformist aspirations, “scaling-up” might be seen to be diminishing this aspiration. In China, and to some degree Italy, this is less of an issue which gives AFNs more fluidity in their approach to scale.

Food materialities are also important, the way in which AFNs assemble them differently – through presentation and marketing – in relation to their contexts also highlights these subtle variances in alterity between the three case studies. For some AFNs the tactile and visceral aspects of the produce are utilised in order to reconnect the consumer with the food chain. For contexts where the consumer is already relatively well-connected to the physicality of food, its tactile properties may tend to showcase the quality both of food and of its procurement process. . In China, food materialities are shifted subtly again, this time more centred on using the visceral qualities of food as a means to develop alternative networks of trust: an aspect which is critical in a consumer context of scepticism and suspicion.

In sum, we have tentatively begun to map out, albeit in a hyper generalised style, the different variations of alterity in relation to their socio-cultural context that was initially sketched out in Figure 1. This form of typology, which highlights the varieties of alterity, poses some interesting questions for future research. There is further scope to develop the lenses mentioned here of locality, scale and food materialities, and to apply them to other countries or geographical contexts. Recent literature has also begun to research the relationship between AFNs and ICT/social media (Bos and Owen, 2016), which is another prominent avenue for exploring how alterity might vary in distinct cultural contexts in the future. Indeed, the capacity for the variation of alterity within AFNs is extensive and suggests that AFNs – within different contexts – are not just emerging “from somewhere else” as it were, and also that “where they are going” is

likely to be very different. Consequently, there can be no (and nor should there be any) expectation of convergence (i.e. on the “Western” model).

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